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ABSTRACT

Recent business and education publications have stressed the excellence concept and the pivotal role of the executive. While effective business leaders are thought to possess certain characteristics, no consensus exists concerning educational leaders' roles. Although instructional leadership has received most attention in education literature, some theorists dispute this emphasis, concluding that school management functions are best left to principals and instructional leadership to teachers. This paper describes a set of five characteristics shared by effective school administrators, including (1) a sense of vision, a comprehensive perspective transcending goals and mission; (2) clearly stated expectations for staff and students; (3) effective formal and informal communication skills; (4) a high degree of presence or visibility; and (5) technical knowledge of curricula and learning processes. The paper takes issue with Education Secretary William Bennett's recommendation that elementary school principals be drawn from a variety of backgrounds. Bennett's suggestion undermines the importance of teacher-learner interactions, a foundation built from years of classroom teaching experience. The most effective leaders enter situations without preconceived notions and adapt their leadership approaches accordingly. (MLH)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT PRINCIPALS

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Recent business and management publications have emphasized the topic of excellence (Hickman & Silva, 1984; Naisbitt & Aburdene, 1985; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Numerous books and journal articles attempting to discern key characteristics of excellent organizations have almost without exception concentrated on the pivotal role played by the executive (Bennis & Namus, 1985; Cleveland, 1985; Zaleznik & de Vries, 1985). These business and management leaders possess, we are told, a common set of characteristics and practices distinguishing them from the less successful executive. This is not to say that these leaders are all alike in their approach or leadership style, rather it is suggested that given variations in personality there still appears to be a series of common markers among this group of excellent leaders.

A similar movement has been taking place in education. Dissatisfaction with the lack of academic achievement in schools has resulted in a number of publications dealing with the excellence topic (Boyer, 1983; Fantini, 1986; Goodlad, 1984; Murphy & Hallinger, 1985). These books and journal articles analyze the multitude of problems facing

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our educational system. Most of these analyses conclude with suggestions for improvements. However, much like the literature from business and management it appears the focus is on the leader's role in pursuing excellence (Blome & James, 1985; Boyer, 1984; Cunningham, 1985; Duke, 1987; Lewis, 1986; Miller, Cohen, & Sayre, 1986).

It should be noted that there is less than unanimous consensus concerning the leader's role. For example, Rallis and Highsmith (1986) take exception to the often voiced expectation that the principal is to assume the instructional leadership role in the school. Examining the multitude of tasks assigned to principals, the authors conclude that school management functions are best left to the administrator while... "instructional leadership that is to raise the quality of teaching can and must come from within the ranks of teachers" (303-304).

Focusing on the leadership role in pursuing educational excellence indicates that principals, and programs for the training of educational leaders, need to emphasize the following qualities: a sense of vision; an ability to clearly enunciate expectations; skills in building a series of two-way communication channels; high visibility; and, technical knowledge.

1) Vision. Principals of effective schools articulate a vision concerning the school (Boyer, 1984; Sergiovanni, 1984). While this vision certainly encompasses goals and objectives, it is much more comprehensive. These leaders have a perspective allowing them to see how a particular task or program fits into a much broader scheme. When people -- be it parents, teachers, students -- ask questions like, "What is our purpose here?" or "Why are we doing such-and-such?" there is no hesitation in demonstrating how this piece fits into the puzzle. People leave discussion with this type of leader feeling confident that there is a sense of direction and purpose. Cleveland (1985) calls this leadership quality "integrative thinking."

An example of vision is found in a Los Angeles Times article concerning one of the inner-city, multi-ethnic high schools (Woo, 1986). In four years this school has gone from a place characterized by gang fights, graffiti, fear and disorder, to what one associate superintendent calls "the paradigm of what an urban school with difficult problems should be" (p. 11). Obviously there is no magic solution to the problems, however the four-year turn around of this institution can clearly be attributed to the vigorous leadership of princial John Howard. Throughout the narrative concerning this man's leadership there is an unmistakable vision concerning Belmont High and the community it serves.

2) Expectations. In effective schools, principals have clearly stated expectations for staff and student body (Donovan, 1982). Bennis and Namus (1985) refer to this practice as "trust through positioning." People are not left wondering where they stand, they know! By contrast a major complaint of teachers in marginal schools is that they seldom find clearly stated expectations. All too often they feel frustrated by a series of conflicting demands that are at best confusing. Interestingly enough, teachers in effective schools are not always in agreement with the principal's expectations. That is not the point. Rather, they understand what is expected and can then discuss this matter on an objective basis with their supervisor. Clarity of purpose is the distinguishing note of such conferences.

3) Communication. Effective communication, a characteristic intimately related to vision and expectations, is a key leadership marker. Lewis (1986) emphasizes the need to "intensify and personalize communication" (pp. 46-63). Whereas the previous two qualities emphasized communication from the leader, truly effective leaders have built two-way patterns of communication. Such leaders establish a series of formal and informal channels allowing communication to flow freely in their direction. Examples of formal channels include conferences with staff, while informal channels are

created through visiting with staff in the faculty lounge. The purpose, whatever the medium, is still the same: to allow for the greatest degree of information flow to the leader.

4) Presence. A high degree of visibility is a key characteristic of effective principals. They emphasize the instructional leadership role by observing classroom teaching and communicating with staff about what is observed. In addition to classroom observation, these leaders interact in a variety of settings with teachers, staff, students and parents throughout the school day. One principal, for example, chooses to deliver office messages to classrooms. The message being conveyed is clear: this principal knows what is going on in the building. These school administrators, by their high visibility emphasize what Sergiovanni (1984) terms symbolic or cultural leadership. Whether consciously or unconsciously, these principals understand their role in transmitting and nurturing the culture of the school. Schein (1985) details the importance of the leader's role in understanding and interpreting the school's culture. This point is often missed by the inexperienced administrator who sets out to become a change agent without first attending to the task of learning the school's culture.

5) Technical knowledge. Effective principals are instructional leaders by virtue of their ability to recognize effective instruction, knowledge of curriculum, and skills in interpreting group testing results.

In the simplest terms possible, effective principals are able to identify quality instruction and support this conclusion with sound reasoning (Look & Manatt, 1984). The result is that principal and teacher have a common language and basis for discussing the learning process. It is possible that the principal and teacher may disagree over methodology, however they have a medium allowing for a sharing of understandings.

The second aspect of technical knowledge concerns the curriculum. Effective principals have studied curriculum theory and design, and are able to place the theoretical within the concrete experience of their backgrounds as instructors (Boyer, 1983). Effective educational leaders have the ability to communicate this technical knowledge of the curriculum in such a way as to instill confidence in the staff when planning changes in school programs.

It is of interest here to note that one of Secretary of Education William Bennett's recent recommendations was that principal's for elementry schools be drawn from a variety of

backgrounds and experiences. As examples he suggests that administrators could be drawn from the ranks of successful leaders in business, the military, government service, publishing, and the arts ("Excerpts from," 1986, p. 35). The Secretary it appears falls prey to what Lindgren (1980) calls the prescientific view of education (pp. 21-22). Everyone tends to think that since they have had successful experience in teaching someone to do something - for example teaching a child to repair a broken toy - that the role of the classroom teacher is just as simple. This type of thinking, of course, completely disregards the evidence demonstrating the complexity of the task faced by classroom teachers.

The point here, and unfortunately one that is lost by Secretary Bennett, is that principals need to have an understanding of the teacher-learner interaction as it occurs in the classroom. This understanding comes from the principal's foundation built by years as a classroom teacher and from a knowledge of curriculum design. It is hoped that Mr. Bennett recommendation will be viewed as naive.

Last of all, effective leaders have established a basis for judging gains in student achievement. Accepting the limitations of any testing program, the principal nonetheless looks to objective measures of student

achievement as one guidepost for assessing the quality of instruction and possible need for remediation or change in aspects of the curriculum.

Emphasis by the principal on the instructional leadership dimension can have a positive effect on student achievement. Hager and Scarr (1983) report the results of one school district's realignment of administrative duties in order to allow principals to devote more time to instructional leadership. The authors report a significant gain in standardized achievement test scores within a relatively brief period of time.

This paper has examined the concept of leadership characteristics, comparing the literature from business and industry with that from education. A distillation of this literature suggests that effective school administrators share a common set of five characteristics. However it is cautioned that effective leaders also appear to be those persons who enter a situation without preconceived notions, but rather see each situation as unique, requiring flexibility in leadership style (Bass, 1981; Duke, 1987; Hersey & Blanchard, 1977; Huddle, 1986; Morse & Lorsch, 1970; Wynn & Guditus, 1984).

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